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CHINA IN DISTRESS

BY

LIEUT. CHARLES F. GAMMON*

We know so little of China and the Chinese, yet have grown so unconsciously familiar with the stupendous calamities which from time to time afflict that great country, that only the intermittent alarm of frequent famine stories brings to us a real sense of the horrors, the sufferings and death, in the great flood-stricken area of China; horrors not alone of mere starvation, but of that stalking, ghastly "famine fever" we call typhus and the raging small-pox which has already laid its black hand upon many of the impoverished, starving multitudes.

In a period of 1,000 years China has had over 800 famines, yet practically all of these have been unknown to the world at large. The great famine of 1878, taking its terrible toll of nine to thirteen million lives, aroused the attention and sympathy of the whole world, and the generous response which followed the appeal of a Famine Committee at that time did much to break down the barriers of anti-foreign feeling which up to then had been insurmountable.

It is difficult for us to realize the real horror of these extensive famines, confined almost wholly to China, India and Russia. Under the best conditions the Chinese live but a sordid life, devoid of many things we would regard as necessary to existence and with every form of luxury unknown,—for what the Chinese know as prosperity, we should regard as the severest hardship, as it means a coarse and meager living, a cramped and cheerless hut, and the most trying toil from the rising of the sun until the fall of darkness. Milk and butter are practically unknown, meat is rarely tasted oftener than once a week, and then only under prosperous conditions, and in the fat years, there is little surplus to be saved for the lean years of famine. Hence, when drought or flood destroy the crops, there is nothing for the hard-working farmers to fall back upon.

A large family is often divided; part go off as refugees, part stay at home. Those remaining take stock of what they have. They perhaps find sufficient grain for the five "mouths" that are left for four months if they eat but a small quantity, but the farmer

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knows that now the *four* months' supply must last them *seven* months, and, therefore, they immediately begin to make their food thin, that is, they eat gruel instead of dry bread. Thus tens of thousands live through the famine who otherwise must die. This gruel gets thinner and thinner and contains more and more weeds and leaves and greens, or even roots where they can be found, and less and less of grain. Every resource is used to obtain edible herbs, and everything not poisonous is put into the pot to help fill up. There is, however, little in these things to sustain life, and the bodies of the suffering family grow thinner and thinner until finally their stomachs and faces become bloated and distorted from the unhealthy elements on which they vainly strive to retain a spark of life.

In the case of a man of means, he sells first his cow, the water buffalo that plows his fields, then his farm utensils, and finally his household goods. One by one all are "eaten up," as he would say. Then the doors and windows are taken from the mud-brick hut and carried to market, and at last the few timbers that support the roof go to nourish the family. Left at last without a roof, they join the endless procession of refugees, some to drop and die where they fall, and others to struggle and stagger onward, in the hope of reaching some more prosperous region. Often they gather together into huge camps, huddled into tiny huts hardly larger than a half-barrel, cut endwise, and made of cheap matting, and in these camps pestilence soon finds its way, often in the form of relapsing fever, frequently the deadly typhus, and also in the dread small-pox which soon ends the misery of hundreds in these horrible groups.

These are the conditions existing to-day over an immense area of China. It is the result of three lean years followed by excessive rains and floods, with terrific typhoons, during all last summer, which wiped out whole towns and villages from the map and turned the roads into bogs.

Mr. Jameson, the Red Cross engineer in the field, writes of processions of gaunt, starving people wandering aimlessly, hopelessly along the roads, and falling and dying in the mud when they can go no further. Day after day he passed dead bodies of men, women and children lying where they had fallen. Famine conditions are indeed so desperate and terrible, so beyond the power of imagination to picture, that the descriptions received from different regions seem incredible. With every day these conditions become more acute and must so continue until harvest. The bark has been eaten from trees, roots have been dug and devoured, and even cannibalism is resorted to in the mad craze and unbearable gnawings of starvation.

The recent state of civil war greatly increased the distress caused by failure of crops and destruction wrought by floods, and the unsettled political conditions, still persisting, make it impossible for the new government to do much in aid of the sufferers. For this reason it becomes imperative that the United States, always China's friend, should come generously to the front with help. The remarkable patience of the Chinese under suffering makes relief comparatively easy, if only the means are supplied.

The present famine affects an area of over 50,000 square miles and a population of over 3,000,000 people. Past experience has rendered possible the distribution of famine relief on a most systematic and economical basis. The pauperizing effect resulting to some extent from relief operations in other famines, due to affording support to thousands during prolonged periods of enforced idleness, has been practically eliminated in this.

The famine fund is being largely used in employing the famine sufferers to reconstruct their own dykes and roads destroyed by the floods. Thus the idle and despairing people are enabled to earn a living while waiting for another harvest, and are at the same time helping to restore normal conditions and to prevent future occurrences of this nature. Wages are paid in food only, and this reward is necessarily so limited as to offer inducements only to those truly deserving. To save and sustain life is the object of famine relief, and since the means never equal the need, the rations must be carefully distributed, and those who are suffering least, ignored for those whose necessities are vital. These extreme cases make no demonstration—they have gotten beyond that. They do not even beg, but are mute and motionless, the spark of life hardly struggling to retain its hold upon their emaciated forms. Sometimes when they understand that the ticket given them means food and life, tears roll down their cheeks. Tickets for food are given only in the home, except in exchange for labor, the necessities of each family being judged, not by the home, but by the faces of its inmates. A man may be hungry and suffering for food, but unless his face is swollen from anemia he must be passed by for those more terribly needy. Were it not that through centuries of poverty and extreme hardship only the strong have survived, half the 3,000,000 now suffering would have died in the first months of the famine.

So prompt and systematic were the plans formed by the committee in Shanghai that nearly all of the 3,000,000 starving ones might be saved, if but the tender impulse of charity were to touch the hearts of a sufficient number of people in this prosperous land. Each day

the cable, with lightning-like rapidity, conveys the dollars sent to the Committee in New York direct to the Committee in Shanghai. Thousands of the helpless ones are by this means given work to do and food to sustain them, and, with the experience gained in famines of the past, the loss of money in administration and all unnecessary expenses are eliminated. Certainly nothing can more appeal to the human heart than the knowledge of starvation, and as the extent of this great famine is becoming better known, so the response becomes more general.

The New York China Famine Relief Committee, composed of representative men, is co-operating with the Red Cross and all money received is promptly cabled to the Committee in Shanghai, without deduction. Thus far, through this channel and others, over \$175,000 has been sent, a sum which is accomplishing great good but one totally inadequate to meet the terrible need.

The Relief Committee appeals to all, even those who can afford to give but little, reminding them that every little will help swell the fund. One dollar will save the life of a man, woman or child for a month; three dollars will preserve a whole family for a similar period, and there are 600,000 families starving, with no possibility of relief until the summer harvest. Time is an important factor in this crisis; in a few weeks help will be of no avail. The sooner work and food are provided, the easier it will be to restore normal conditions and to stay the epidemic of disease which accompanies starvation.

Remittances may be sent to Mr. Jacob H. Schiff, Treasurer, 1 Madison Avenue, New York.

NUBIA AND THE BERBERINE

Under this title Mr. H. W. Beckett delivered a lecture before the Cairo Scientific Society, last year, which was printed in *The Cairo Scientific Journal* (Vol. 5, No. 59, 1911). He gives much information about that region known to-day as Nubia, a long tract which from the First Cataract at Aswan to Dongola borders the Nile with a fringe of fertile growth. This strip of cultivation varies in breadth from a few meters just south of Aswan, where the granite precludes any but the most meager attempts at tillage, up to two or more kilometers at places further south. In these places the Berberine indus-